

(Tsunami 2nd Anniversary 2007)

## **Tsunami, the Global Disaster of two years ago and the many lessons it should teach us today**

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Two painfully silent years have passed since NATURE, with an unimaginably great deal of POWER packed within itself, and with its inseparable dear spouse VIOLENCE sitting besides, wrought inestimable havoc in regions of south-eastern Asia, ruthlessly destroying lives and damaging property. Tsunami admittedly did not, of its own, discriminate favourably or otherwise towards any specific group, on the basis of religion, ethnicity or political ideology. Of that, we are sure. Nor are we willing to concede that Tsunami was a cat's paw in the hands of a power or person above itself. This is our specific stand.

These reflections on Tsunami are the old world speculations as to who caused the Tsunami. On the other hand, one might dismiss them as ancient myths, no matter where they had their origin. In relation to such incidents we also have references which speak of them as *vindicta mihi* or expressions of divine wrath or heavenly justice in anger and revenge as in the case of destruction brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Such thinking and such action seem unable to claim any validity today in the hands of high-ranking religious thinkers of very great eminence.

Even in India, thousands of years before the birth of Buddhism, Vedic Indians believed that the Rain God Parjanya was an upholder of Divine Justice, who with his weapon of Thunder and Lightning struck dead evil-doers or *dus-krut* on earth: *Parjanya stanayan hanti duskrutah*. God of Waters or Varuna, filled with water the bellies of immoral people and rolled them into their graves. This latter is how the Vedic Indians looked upon the then-dreaded disease Dropsy. Whatever the beliefs may have been, the ancients did want to preserve moral goodness on

earth among men, and of course, women too. And they did succeed a great deal more than we do today. In the world today, moral goodness is deserting our men and women, the young and the old. What comes in its wake, one shall never know. Many of the older and younger men and women ask us today 'What does it matter as to what happens after death'. It is best they themselves answer these questions and face up to the realities when time comes.

Now let us take a more realistic look at what happened on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2004. In Sri Lanka, anything between 40 to 50 thousand people are said to have perished in this calamitous disaster. The bulk of this came collectively from all three ethnic groups of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Some of these, it is learnt, were visitors to the island, come home with their Sri Lankan spouses and children to spend holidays here. Is it not sad indeed what they had to face? We grieve over it. But we have learnt it from our childhood days, in our *dhamma* lessons, at home and in the schools, that no place is safe enough, neither in the sky nor in mid-ocean, nor in the caves in the mountains, hiding where one can escape death:

*Na antalikkhe na samudda-majjhe  
na pabbatānam vivaram pavittha  
Na vijjati so jagatippadeso  
yatthatthito mucceyya maccu-raja.*

Dhp. v. 127

Accepting or not accepting such a thing as life expectancy or *ayu-pramanaya*, no mortal born into life shall ever escape death. This is a fundamental awareness in Buddhism without which, we are compelled to believe, no Buddhist shall ever work in the direction of his salvation. It is this awareness which stimulates the Buddhist into serious religiousness and upgrade his life in the direction of his salvation or liberation, whichever name one uses for the religious goal of the Buddhist.

This being the real situation with regard to those Buddhists who died in the

Tsunami disaster, one can precisely say about them that they have already gone in the direction they were destined to go, according to the way they had prepared themselves in life. On the part of the living, remembering them with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation is the primary duty towards those near and dear ones who perished in the Tsunami disaster.

Next comes the *karmic* determinant of each one of them which alone severally plans, and prints out as it were, the quality of the dead person's next life, which is specifically stated as *yatha kammupage satte* or as it befits the way one has lived. The decision is of none other, neither yours or mine. If by any chance the journey turns out to be a downward degradation into a lower-than-human state which is referred to as *apaya* or *niraya*, there is one place among them with a total absence of food and clothing of any sort. This is referred to as the realm of the *pretas* or hungry ghosts. It is they and they alone among the departed who can be relieved by the living, via offerings of food and clothing made to one's religious clergy, i.e. via the religious channel and not through hand to hand offerings.

Now a serious and meaningful word of advice. No matter the religious denomination to which one belongs. What matters most, we believe, is the degree of true religiousness one integrates into one's life, while one lives here. Perilous disasters like tsunamis, earth-quakes, and volcanic eruptions are deadening, convulsive warnings with enough voltage to awaken slumbering mortals to realities of life. In times of such disasters, prayers made singly or collectively, seems hardly to answer. Misbehaving elements like fire and water are relentless in their violent behaviour towards anything and everything, animate or inanimate. Theirs is elemental behaviour which sweeps over every thing. It is only in Nirvana that one is out of their reach.

*Yattha apo ca pathavi ca*

*tejo vayo na gadhati.*

*Kevaddha Sutta.*

All religions, we believe, have this bliss of immunity in their transcendence from what is worldly and grossly material to something higher and transcendental. The Buddhists believe in the possibility of this ascent while one is still in a mortal frame, here and now. One does really enjoy being so. It is an achievement which is beyond the world, call it divine or whatever you will. But while living here, one enjoys the bliss of its eternality, here and now.

This achievement is admittedly the product of a change of attitudes, that is our attitudes towards the world and towards one another. We in Buddhism call it *Brahma-viharas* or living like the divines on earth, in the midst of humans. It begins with practice of infinite love towards everything that lives, both man and animal. It is *metta*. That is friendliness or absence of hostility. There can be no destruction of any life on any account.

A greater part of the world is now, i.e. globally, moving in this direction. The new leadership in this movement of benevolence appears to be reintroduced by courageous new thinking in the Christian world. They admit that the slaughter of animals range over a much larger territory than the need for food, to satisfy the gluttony of the humans. They vehemently challenge the idea that God created the animal world for such distasteful use by man.

Closely following this virtue of friendliness or *metta* is compassion or *karuṇa*, i.e. being moved or distressed at the suffering of others. He who honestly loves another has necessarily to feel so. This is feeling exactly same as one feels for oneself. In Buddhism, we have a special name for this called the *attupanayika dhamma pariyaya* or self-example ethical correction.

The more demanding positive virtue in this group is the cultivated ability to rejoice in the success of others. It is a primary lesson which mankind needs globally to learn today. Possibly learn anew, to knock out of existence pettiness of jealousy and envy, in all areas of dominant themes like religion, ethnicity and politics. It is *mudita* or the ability to rejoice in the success and greatness of the

other. It is unfortunately mistranslated by many students as well as eminent exponents of Buddhism as sympathetic joy. No, no, we say. It certainly is a feeling of appreciative joy.

The disaster of Tsunami should awaken us to realities of life, i.e. in terms of our life here and a life beyond this. This life continuity, in both directions of the past and the future, is now becoming a scientific reality. The age for new thinking by mankind in all primary areas like religion, ethnicity and politics has already come. Do not be caught on the wrong foot. Now is the time. Never a day too early.